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ABSTRACT

Noting that issues surrounding grammar instruction are a source of controversy within the English language arts curriculum, this concept paper examines the usefulness of formal instruction in naming parts of speech, diagramming sentences, naming types of phrases and clauses, and naming sentence types. Following an introduction that defines grammar, the paper summarizes research on grammar instruction, noting that it is best taught in conjunction with actual student writing. This section also touches on the abstract nature of grammar, the usefulness of knowing some grammatical rules, and on nonstandard dialects. The paper then discusses the implications for instruction, including the role of grammar instruction and effective alternatives to isolated grammar drills. The paper concludes by noting that grammar instruction should not be as widespread as it is, should not be seen as a cure for writing problems, and should not be a substitute for writing instruction. A bibliography concludes the document. (SKC)

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Oregon Department of Education

Number 6

Grammar

INTRODUCTION

Issues surrounding grammar instruction are a source of on-going controversy within the English language arts curriculum. Research studies from as early as 1906 through recent publications have attempted to shed some light on the relationship between knowledge of grammar rules and effective writing (Gann, 1984). The difference between grammar instruction and writing instruction is "that knowledge of grammar is theoretical understanding, a knowledge about, whereas the ability to speak and write well is a practical understanding, a knowledge of" (Holt, 1982).

Mastery of the conventions of writing is considered one of the hallmarks of literacy. Peter Elbow remarks, "Writing without errors doesn't make you anything, but writing with errors — if you give it to other people — makes you a hick, a boob, a bumpkin" (Elbow, 1981). How, then, are schools to resolve the dilemma regarding the teaching of grammar?

Initially an understanding of what is meant by grammar is needed. In this context, grammar refers to the study of systems used to explain the workings of the language. It includes the naming of parts of speech, diagramming, naming certain types of phrases and clauses, and naming of sentence types (Hillocks, 1986). While usage and conventions often intermingle with grammar, references to the formal study of grammar in the various research reports are directed only to this system of labeling.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

The preponderance of research on grammar instruction points out that less teaching of formal grammar occurs in the classroom and that when instruction does occur it is best done in conjunction with actual student writing. Researchers such as Petrosky (1977) and Hillocks (1986) have found that the formal study of grammar does not improve writing skills and may, in fact, have a negative effect when it takes time away from instruction and practice in writing.

This position is further supported by studies reported by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer in *Research in Written Composition*. The Harris study, one of five selected for the report from an initial list of over 1,000, examined the effects of formal traditional grammar instruction on correct written English in twelve- to fourteen-year-olds. The results for the ten classes in five different schools were based on an objective grammar test and essays. Harris concluded that the study of grammatical terminology had a negligible or even relatively harmful effect on writing and that this failure to profit from grammar instruction was spread across socioeconomic backgrounds and educational environments (Braddock and others, 1963).

In statements based on the results of six research studies, the California Department of Education found a clear direction for writing instruction:

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Perhaps the most widely ignored research finding is that the teaching of formal grammar, if divorced from the process of writing, has little or no effect on the writing ability of students. Studies from 1906 through 1976 have repeatedly reached this conclusion. It seems to make no difference whether the system taught is traditional, structural, or transformational grammar. Such instruction, when not directly related with the writing process, does not help students improve their writing.

"Perhaps the most widely ignored research finding is that the teaching of formal grammar, if divorced from the process of writing, has little or no effect on the writing ability of students."

In fact, they found " . . . that in programs in which excessive time is devoted to the study of grammar independently of the writing process, the effects are negative" (California Department of Education, 1982).

Abstract Nature of Grammar

At issue also is the level of abstraction required in the study of grammar. Language is an abstraction of experience, representing events and ideas through words. Then words are grouped to represent abstractly the relationships between and among those events and ideas. To describe those relationships between words we use a further abstraction, grammatical terminology. "Throw in diagramming — a symbolic representation of the description of those relationships — and you have level four abstraction. And then we wonder why our rather slow eighth-grade students have trouble with gerunds and participles. Grammar may be the nuclear physics of the English curriculum" (Small, 1985).

Expecting students to grapple with such complicated abstractions is not supported by current information about language acquisition. "Five-year-old children entering school already know English grammar, intimately, thoroughly, and unconsciously, to the level that most high school texts purport to teach. They already have nearly total competence to express meanings they apprehend. Syntactic maturity in performance comes with development rather than rule learning" (Sanborn, 1986).

Though young children know how to perform, they do not have the ability to learn the abstractions of the systems behind the performance. The cognitive development of students is such that some will never master the grammatical terminology for the performances they can produce. Others, of course, by the secondary level at least, can master some of the abstractions as they are taught. Sanborn

concludes that "if grammar is never taught in the schools, I think little will be lost as long as students are using language widely and constantly."

The Usefulness of Knowing Some Rules

Another area addressed in the research is whether it is useful to know some rules of grammar. General agreement seems to be that as students use language, the inherent rules of grammar are learned implicitly rather than requiring direct instruction.

A graphic distinction between knowing rules and production is shown in an example dealing with the rule for ordering adjectives. Identifying the words *French, the, young, girls, four*, various groups from sixth grade to college have been asked to cite the rule for ordering adjectives. The researcher has yet to meet a native English speaker, regardless of dialectical differences, who could not put these words into the correct order (*the four young French girls*) even though they did not know the rule ("in English, the order of adjectives is: first, number; second, age; and third, nationality"). Case after case is cited of rule work and rule learning that is counter-productive to improving writing instruction and, in many cases, does not even make sense to a native speaker's use of the language (Hartwell, 1985).

As students expand their ability to use language in more complex constructions, the need to understand both the correct usage and the underlying grammatical principle may arise. An approach to understanding grammar rules which draws from and feeds into the reading, writing, speaking, and listening program and which employs an inductive inquiry-oriented method may be appropriate (Fraser and Hodson, 1978).

Mina Shaughnessy, who spent years analyzing the problems of poorly skilled writers and examining effective instructional strategies, uses an inquiry approach to help students examine grammatical errors in their own writing. She believes that " . . . a rudimentary grasp of such grammatical concepts as subject, verb, object, indirect object, modifier, etc., is almost indispensable if one intends to talk with students about their sentences." She cautions, however, that the teacher's pleasure in presenting complete grammatical information may outweigh the ability of the students to understand and use the concepts. Therefore, she says, "That grammar is best which gives the greatest return (i.e., ability to reason about errors) for the least investment of time" (Shaughnessy, 1977).

One issue sometimes held up as rationale for teaching a large number of grammar rules is that students will be assessed for grammatical knowledge on standardized tests. A research study by Gary Sutton examined eleven such tests

using a broad definition of grammar. "Any question, for example, which required the student to know the meaning of 'noun' or presupposed he/she was familiar with a 'verb' counted as a question of grammatical terminology" (Sutton, 1976). The results showed that only four of the eleven tests examined required knowledge of any grammatical terminology. Sutton concludes that while knowledge of standard usage is assessed by standardized tests, knowledge of grammatical terminology is not.

Nonstandard Dialects

While all students have a highly developed linguistic competence within whatever dialect

they use, not all students share the same set of language rules. Teachers working with non-native English speakers and students who use a nonstandard dialect find that written communication requires more adherence to rules than oral communication. Students who use nonstandard English are subjected to even more isolated drill on grammar and mechanics than their more mainstream classmates. This has not produced improvement in writing skills, however, probably because students find it difficult to draw upon abstract rules in actual writing situations.

How then can nonmainstream students be helped to incorporate the conventions of standard English in their writing? Marcia Farr and Harvey Daniels in *Language Diversity and Writing Instruction* suggest that they need to know which elements of their own oral dialect differ from standard English. They should learn the standard form for use when they need it in writing. "This does not mean making error the center of the curriculum, or teaching a great number of standard English rules 'before students can write.' Instead, it is essentially a matter of helping students become skillful at reseeing and revising drafts of their own writing" (Farr and Daniels, 1986).

Results of Long-Range Studies

Some of the available research on the effects of grammar instruction on student achievement in writing has been criticized as being too narrow in scope, too short to measure growth accurately, or too subjective and anecdotal in nature.

However, many experts agree on the validity of a New Zealand study because of its size, length and control. The experiment is detailed in *The Role of Grammar in a Secondary School Curriculum* (Elley and others, 1979). The study was conducted over a three-year period. The experiment started with 248 average pupils, ages 12 and 13, grouped carefully into eight classes "to ensure that they were equivalent in terms of size, general ability, reading comprehension, reading vocabulary, English language usage and with the proportions of children from each sex, ethnic group, contributing schools, and subject options." One hundred sixty-six completed the three-year experiment.

The three teachers involved taught equally in the three test groups.

- A transformational grammar course using the grammar, rhetoric and literature "strands" of a curriculum model developed at the University of Oregon by A. R. Kitzhaber in 1970.
- A course using the rhetoric and literature strands of the Kitzhaber Curriculum, but substituting extra reading and creative writing for the grammar.
- A traditional course which was considered typical of those found in New Zealand secondary schools at the time of the project, with textbooks and instruction in composition, comprehension and "functional" grammar.

The results of the study reported little difference in language skills among the three groups in language tests and essay writing skills. The study did report some differences in student attitude, assessed by the Semantic Differential procedure, with students in the group focusing on reading and writing showing positive feelings about literature and writing while students in the groups studying grammar saw sentence study as unpleasant and useless (Elley and others, 1979).

A research study conducted in 1975 with 278 college freshmen entering UCLA found three issues of importance (Bamberg, 1978).

- "Grammatical rules learned through formal study and studied apart from writing fail to transfer to later writing tasks and result in no significant improvement."
- Fifty-three percent of the students enrolling in a remedial level English class reported that they had three or more semesters of high school grammar instruction.
- Only 43 percent reported an equivalent amount of instruction in content development and organization in writing.

Bamberg emphasizes that the students in the study spent a higher percentage of time studying grammar than any other aspect of writing, contrary to public perceptions that schools should get back to the basics of grammar instruction. She concludes " . . . that an applied approach based on student errors and integrated with the total writing process improves writing . . ." more than the isolated study of grammar.

Another massive research effort was recently undertaken by George Hillocks, Jr., who reports the results of a meta-analysis of over 2,000

"That grammar is best which gives the greatest return (i.e., ability to reason about errors) for the least investment of time."

studies of writing instruction in *Research on Written Composition* (1986). In the chapter called "Grammar and the Manipulation of Syntax," after analyzing the results of a number of studies investigating grammar instruction, Hillocks comes to the conclusion that, "none of the studies reviewed for the present report provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skills. If schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional school grammar (as many still do), they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing" (Hillocks, 1986).

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

Repeatedly, the various research studies seem to come to similar conclusions regarding the implications for instruction.

Role of Grammar Instruction

Several specific directions emerge from the research:

- In both elementary and secondary English courses students need daily opportunities to write sentences, paragraphs, essays and stories, along with periodic lessons in spelling, mechanics and oral usage far more than they need formal grammar instruction (Gann, 1984).

- Grammar should be only a small portion of the total language arts curriculum. The practical skills of reading, writing, and oral communication should take up the bulk of a student's time and energy. "Skill development in reading comprehension and interpretation, in the various types of written discourse, in listening, and in oral presentation of thought is the primary business of . . . English education" (Holt, 1982).

- Yetta Goodman urges that the greatest amount of time should be spent on using language and only a small portion on learning about language. She asserts that knowledge about language grows organically through use and should never be considered a prerequisite to use (Shuman, 1981).

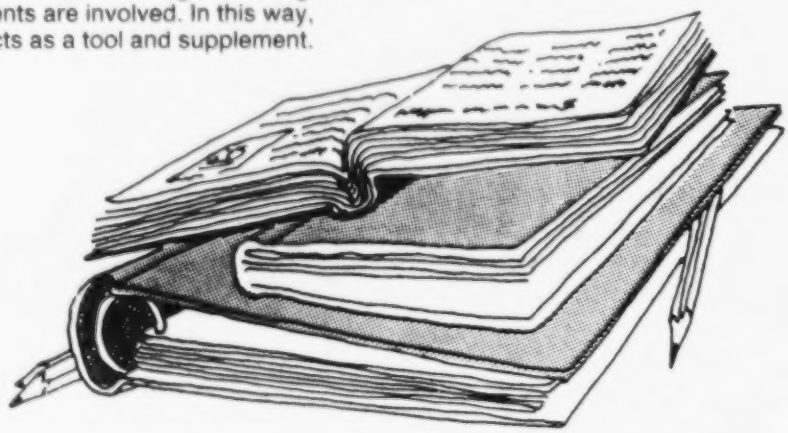
- Fraser and Hodson (1978) suggest teaching as little grammar as necessary to answer a particular language question or problem and always in relation to a writing or reading task in which students are involved. In this way, grammar acts as a tool and supplement.

- Peter Elbow encourages writers to pretend they have an editor who will later fix all the grammatical and mechanical errors. This frees writers during the drafting stages and then allows them to "hire themselves as editors" in the final proofreading and correcting stage (Elbow, 1973).

- The critical issue remains limiting the amount of instructional time devoted to rule-learning. "A didactic, prescriptive, isolated, skill-drill approach to grammar can defeat its own intent by consuming valuable class time with little or no payoff" (Fraser and Hodson, 1978).

Effective Alternatives to Isolated Grammar Instruction

Three approaches emerge through several studies as effective alternatives to grammar drills. The single most effective tool for increasing writing competency is supported by the vast majority of the research studies: students must have frequent opportunities to write at length about topics of interest and to receive feedback on their writing from knowledgable teachers. Even the practice of freewriting, which is questionable without feedback or correction, is more effective in improving writing than grammar study removed from the context of the student's own writing (Hillocks, 1986).



A large number of the studies advocate the use of sentence combining instruction as an alternative to grammar instruction. Hillocks (1986) reports that 60 percent of the studies show significant increases in the length of syntactic structures with sentence combining instruction.

Sentence combining emphasizes methods for joining short sentences into longer, carefully constructed sentences. "Over the past ten years, several studies of classes from the elementary school level through the first year in college have shown that sentence combining exercises, both oral and written, even when conducted with little or no grammatical terminology, can be effective in increasing the sentence-writing maturity of students" (California Department of Education, 1982).

> *"Grammar should be only a small portion of the total language arts curriculum. The practical skills of reading, writing, and oral communication should take up the bulk of a student's time and energy."*

Mina Shaughnessy advocates sentence combining techniques as "perhaps the closest thing to finger exercises for the inexperienced writer. Whereas traditional grammar study classifies the parts of the sentence, sentence combining requires the student to generate complex sentences out of kernel sentences" (Shaughnessy, 1977).

While sentence combining offers a constructive approach to language manipulation, it is not without pitfalls. Students may increase the number of errors they make as they practice and try out new combinations. An emphasis on sentence combining may lead students to conclude that longer sentences are always better sentences, resulting in awkward and convoluted constructions (Hillocks, 1986).

A number of experts have recommended an approach to grammar instruction which uses an inductive or inquiry method. This approach places students in the role of examining their own and others' writings and, from answers to their questions and observations about language issues, they can make generalizations about grammatical structures. The teacher guides the inquiry and provides direct input when necessary.

This approach works particularly well in integrating grammar study with reading, writing, listening and speaking activities. "The most meaningful context for studying grammar inductively is extended language-in-use (for some purpose, for some intended audience, in some situation). The student's own writing is one such excellent context" (Fraser and Hodsen, 1978).

CONCLUSION

Several conclusions are supported throughout the research and literature on grammar. First, grammar instruction should not be as widespread as it is, should not be seen as a cure for writing

problems, and should not be a substitute for writing instruction. Research into grammar instruction and learning development clearly shows that grade school students are not ready for the abstractions of grammar study. Indeed, some students never reach grammar readiness. Grammar study should not be used as a

> *"The cognitive development of students is such that some will never master the grammatical terminology for the performances they can produce."*

substitute for communication skills (written or oral) and when instruction turns to grammar, it should not be seen in any light other than instruction in how the language works. The amount of time spent on rule-learning, diagramming, and drilling should be examined carefully.

Results of intensive investigation in student control of the conventions of writing indicate that while nearly all students produce some errors, they have developed a good deal of control in using written language. The National Assessment of Educational Progress suggests, "instructional procedures that encourage students to edit their work for grammar, punctuation, and spelling as a last stage in the writing experience would seem to reflect what the best writers do" (Applebee, 1987).

The National Council of Teachers of English, after decades of study in the issues surrounding grammar instruction, passed a resolution in 1986:

> Resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English affirm the position that the use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing, and that, in order to improve both of these, class time at all levels must be devoted to opportunities for meaningful listening, speaking, reading and writing; and that NCTE urge the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction (NCTE, August 1986).

Generally, teachers, curriculum writers, textbook publishers and textbook selectors should see, through the research, what grammar instruction is and what it does and does not do. If the goal of the English curriculum is to make students effective communicators, then it makes little sense, in light of what has been discovered this century, for students to spend a great deal of their time learning grammar. That time can be better spent in meaningful interactions with writing, reading, speaking, and listening as part of a total English language arts program.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Some of the citations in the bibliography do not have annotations. Titles are either self-explanatory or works were referred to on a limited basis in the paper.

Applebee, Arthur N. and others. *Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling: Controlling the Conventions of English at Ages 9, 13, and 17*. Princeton, NJ: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1987.

This booklet contains an analysis of errors made in compositions written for the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Implications for instruction are included.

Bamberg, Betty. "Composition Instruction Does Make a Difference: A Comparison of the High School Preparation of College Freshman in Regular and Remedial English Classes." *Research in the Teaching of English*. 12.1 (Feb. 1978): 47-59.

This article includes a brief review of some research studies and a detailed explanation of a study done with 278 freshmen entering UCLA. Conclusions and future directions are included.

Braddock, Richard and others. *Research in Written Composition*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963.

An analysis of five research studies in composition includes implications for instruction. The Harris study is the most pertinent to grammar issues.

California Department of Education. *Handbook for Planning an Effective Writing Program, K-12*. 1982.

In addition to providing a comprehensive checklist and overview of writing instruction, the review of research is concise and usable.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Both of Elbow's works address the whole issue of writing in a very readable way. Grammatical concerns are treated as part of editing.

Elley, W. B. and others. *The Role of Grammar in a Secondary School Curriculum*. Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 1979.

This is the most complete experimental study to date. Three groups were set up, one studying transformational grammar, one studying traditional grammar, one studying no formal grammar at all. The results show little, if any, significant differences in the student outcomes tested.

Farr, Marcia and Harvey Daniels. *Language Diversity and Writing Instruction*. New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, 1986.

This recent publication addresses the various issues surrounding writing instruction for students who speak a nonstandard dialect or are not native speakers of English.

Fraser, Ian S. and Lynda M. Hodson. "Twenty-one Kicks at the Grammar Horse," *English Journal* 67.9 (Dec. 1978): 49-54.

This article addresses a variety of issues about grammar instruction and provides references to research studies.

Gann, Marjorie. "Teaching Grammar: Is Structural Linguistics Really Better?" *English Quarterly* 17.1 (Spr. 1984): 31-53.

This article examines the various grammars and their appropriateness in the classroom. She concludes that formal grammar study may have a role in the secondary classroom, but that grammar study is certainly less important than writing practice.

Hartwell, Patrick. "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar." *College English* 47.2 (Feb. 1985): 105-27.

Hartwell examines the controversy over grammar study and concludes that it is time for teachers and researchers to move on to more interesting inquiries, knowing that research has clearly shown teaching grammar to be ineffective.

Hillocks, George, Jr. *Research on Written Composition*. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1986.

Chapter 5 ("Grammar and the Manipulation of Syntax") is the most germane to the issue of grammar study. Hillocks reviews research on experimental approaches to teaching various grammars and sentence-combining. The general conclusion is that teaching grammar has a negligible or negative effect on student writing whereas sentence-combining has a positive effect.

Holt, J. R. "In Defense of Formal Grammar." *Curriculum Review* 21.2 (May 1982): 173-78.

This article makes a case for the formal study of English grammar as a standardization factor. Without grammar study, Holt believes the use of language will be sloppy. However, he supports reading, writing and oral communication as the primary focus of language arts.

National Council of Teachers of English. Resolution on the Study of Grammar. August 1986.

Petrosky, Anthony R. "Research Roundup — Grammar Instruction: What We Know." *English Journal* 66.9 (Dec. 1977): 86-8.

This short summary focuses on several pertinent research studies in grammar instruction examining procedures, validity, and results.

Sanborn, Jean. "Grammar: Good Wine Before Its Time." *English Journal* 75.3 (Mar. 1986): 72-80.

Sanborn correlates grammar study with learning development, noting that the abstractions of grammar study are beyond most students. She suggests that some students are never ready for a formal grammar study and those that will be are seldom ready at the point they receive the instruction.

Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide For the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Shaughnessy's book grew out of her experiences teaching in a program for disadvantaged youth in New York's City College. She examines a variety of writing problems and explores teaching approaches in a very readable and realistic way.

Shuman, R. Baird, ed. *Education in the 80's: English*. Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1981.

This collection of short essays addresses a multitude of issues in all areas of English language arts education.

Small, Robert. "Why I'll Never Teach Grammar Again." *English Education* 17.3 (Oct. 1985): 174-78.

Small cites his own experience in grammar teaching and his coming to a conclusion that instruction in grammar is a hold-over from medieval schooling when grammar was taught in the study of classical languages.

Sutton, Gary. "Do We Need to Teach a Grammar Terminology?" *English Journal* 65.9 (Dec. 1976): 37-40.

Sutton examines eleven standarized tests and provides an overall item classification for each along with a comparison summary.

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The review of research and initial draft of this paper was done by Carl R. Shinkle, English teacher at North Salem High School, Salem-Keizer School District. The paper was revised to reflect comments from Oregon educators and published by the Department of Education.

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